

Just open up the VA's budget documents and you will see a host of performance measures that show a degree of institutional accountability that is the envy of other Government agencies and roundly praised by independent observers. Let me tick off a few of those performance measures, and as I am doing so, please be mindful of how the improvements in these areas during the Bush years have impacted the lives of veterans.

The percentage of patients who report being seen within 20 minutes of scheduled appointments by the VA care facilities has improved from 65 percent in 2002 to 73 percent through the end of last year.

The percentage of primary care appointments scheduled within 30 days of the desired date has improved from 89 percent in 2002 to 96 percent through the end of last year.

The percentage of specialty care appointments scheduled within 30 days of the desired date have improved from 86 percent in 2002 to 93 percent this year.

The number of veterans the VA treats in noninstitutional, long-term care settings has increased by 50 percent since 2002.

And the list goes on and on and on.

In 2004, the Rand Corporation examined why VA patients get better chronic preventative care than similar U.S. audits. The answer? Rand concluded that the VA's edge is linked to improved information technology, tracking of performance, and accountability. And that is when in these charts this kind of recognition began to take over. All of this was ignored in the speech by the Senator from Washington. So let's look at some of those facts.

Washington Monthly is not necessarily a publication that constantly praises the Bush administration, but it says VA care is the "best care anywhere"—a tremendous statement and a very fine article about the phenomenal increases in quality health care delivered by the Veterans' Administration over the last number of years.

That is not the end of that story. Here is another part of that story, and this comes from not a Washington publication but from Time magazine. It goes on to say in this article how VA hospitals have become the best in the Nation. It says that for the sixth year in a row—let's backtrack to the Bush administration. I think they have been around a few years, maybe 6 or more. VA hospitals last year scored higher than private facilities on the University of Michigan's American Customer Satisfaction Index. The VA scored 83 out of 100. Private institutions scored 71 out of 100. That is a pretty good record. In fact, it is the best record in the United States.

Now, what did BusinessWeek magazine say about it? They said something very similar. They said that 154 hospitals and 871 clinics run by the Veterans' Administration have been ranked best in class by a number of independent groups on a broad range of

measures from chronic care to heart disease treatment, and on and on. The VA's prescription for accuracy rates is greater than 99.97 percent. That is the rest of the story, and it is a mighty important story.

Now, let me talk just a few minutes about money because I think that is part of why we are as successful as we are, but it is also a phenomenal statement of this Congress—yes, a Republican-led Congress—and this administration's commitment to America's veterans. What are those accomplishments during the Bush years? Let me list a few.

With enactment of the 2007 budget, VA's health care budget will have increased 70 percent during the Bush years. Look at the numbers. Here they are. Those are undeniable. Those, in fact, are facts. They are budgetary facts. It is one of the fastest growth rates and increases in budget in any other area except defense in a time of war in this period of budgeting of the U.S. Government. Has a Republican-led Congress turned its back on American veterans? Quite the opposite.

The GI bill educational benefits for veterans has been boosted by 65 percent, raising the lifetime benefit from \$23,400 to \$38,700.

A new educational program was created for members of the Guard and Reserve activated after September 11, 2001, providing up to \$39,960 in lifetime benefits.

The educational benefit for survivor and dependents of vets has been increased by 46 percent.

The maximum VA home loan guarantee has been increased by 107 percent.

The largest expansion of the National Cemetery System since the Civil War is currently underway.

Historic legislation was enacted to permit certain disabled veterans to receive their disability and military retirement benefits concurrently.

Comprehensive legislation was enacted to update and strengthen civilian protection available to members of the Armed Forces.

Comprehensive legislation was enacted to improve job training and placement services for veterans.

A new insurance program was created to provide immediate benefits—payments of between \$25,000 to \$100,000 to servicemembers who have been traumatically injured since the beginning of the war on terror. Mr. President, 2,700 injured veterans have received that benefit.

That is the record. That is the record, and that is the one this Congress and this President have responded to in a most timely and, more importantly, responsible fashion.

Now that I think the record is clear, what are some of the other answers?

Well, some on the other side would say it is money, money, money, and more money. We have found it is quite the opposite. It is making the system we have work more efficiently, more

responsibly. We are now reshaping VA to handle the high-tech problems it has had, or the informational problems it has had, to make sure we secure the names and the lists and the informational flow of our veterans and their backgrounds. I am extremely proud of the work we have done, and we have done it in a bipartisan way.

So why now, in the late hours of this year, are we all of a sudden hearing all of these things that are what I believe to be improper statements about the Veterans' Administration? Well, I think we have to recognize what is at hand. It is a political year. But there is something we have never done; that is, politicize veterans or politicize our military. And we shouldn't start now.

Our record is strong. Our support of veterans has always been there. I have given my colleagues the facts and the numbers. I am proud of the accomplishments we have made this year alone, a near 14 percent increase in veterans health care or veterans budgets in general. There is no other agency of our Government except Defense that has had that kind of an increase.

So let's recognize what the year is all about. It is politics and it is political. What I have given my colleagues is a factual accounting of the great successes we have had in veterans affairs, with veterans, delivering service to veterans. That doesn't mean we are perfect and it doesn't mean every veteran got exactly what they wanted the moment they asked for it. That will never exist. But we will be responsive. We do care. And the expression on the part of this Congress, this President, and the American taxpayer in relation to the support of our veterans is, in fact, unprecedented.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. Who yields time?

Mr. CRAIG. Mr. President, I note the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. STEVENS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. ISAKSON). Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. STEVENS. Mr. President, I believe it is time to close morning business.

#### CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator is correct. Morning business is closed.

#### DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2007—CONFERENCE REPORT

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the hour of 10 a.m. having arrived, the Senate will resume

consideration of H.R. 5631, which the clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

Conference Report to accompany H.R. 5631, an Act making appropriations for the Department of Defense for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2007, and for other purposes.

Mr. MCCAIN. Mr. President, today we are considering the conference report on the Department of Defense Appropriations Act for fiscal year 2007. The funding provided in this legislation is crucial for the ongoing war on terror. It is imperative that critical resources continue to be provided for the brave men and women who have answered their Nation's call. It is our duty to support those who defend our freedom and for that reason I will vote in favor of this legislation. However, while I will support passage, I note with concern the billions of dollars in wasteful earmarks that have again found their way into both the conference report and the joint explanatory statement.

Of equal importance to the legislation we are considering today is the National Defense Authorization Act for 2007. I am encouraged by last night's report that an agreement has been reached between Chairman WARNER and Chairman HUNTER. With bipartisan cooperation, I am confident that the conference report will be filed soon and its final passage can be achieved before we leave this week. It is a matter of national security and imperative in fulfilling our duty to defend the Nation.

An important provision contained in the Senate-passed Defense Authorization Act would require regular budgeting for the ongoing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is necessary because even though we have been fighting the war on terror for nearly 5 years, we continue to fund it through emergency supplemental spending bills that have become the rule, rather than the exception as would be expected for unanticipated expenditures. Fortunately, the provision to require budgeting for the war was adopted by a vote of 98 to 0, and I am very hopeful that this important budgetary requirement will remain intact in the conference report. The next budget submission will be expected to include funding to conduct the ongoing conflict for the next year.

The appropriations conference report before us today appropriates over \$447 billion dollars for the Department of Defense. While this is considerable funding, it is more than \$4 billion below what the President requested. Not only does this legislation provide less than the President's request, but many of the President's programs have been stripped out and replaced with earmarks for favored projects. These are serious times that require serious people to make serious decisions—tough decisions that may go against the special interests. I need not remind my colleagues that we are at war. Supporting the President's budget and the

troops it sustains should be our primary focus, not parochial interests.

The issues we face as a Nation require all of us to make sacrifices. The service members who defend our Nation interests around the globe are making great sacrifices. The families who wait for them back home are making sacrifices. Because we ask these heroes to forfeit so much, we in the Congress should also be ready to make sacrifices. By doing so, a message can be sent that our Nation's security and the welfare of our service members are higher priorities than earmarks inserted to gain favor from special interests or the opportunity to send out a press release touting the bacon we are bringing home.

The practice of earmarking has reached epic proportions, and the harm it has caused in some cases has been clearly exposed. In the last 2 years alone we have had ample evidence of the corrupting influence of these earmarks on the Congress. It is clear that they detract from the trust and confidence the American taxpayer has placed in their elected officials. How high will we let the Federal deficit climb before we take our fiscal responsibilities seriously? What is it going to take for us to finally say, enough is enough? We should pass a Defense Appropriations Bill which mirrors the authorization bill and fulfills the requirements of our military as requested by the President.

The American taxpayer has a right to expect us to get the most out of each and every defense dollar, especially at a time when those dollars are so critical. The money that is being diverted to unauthorized projects should instead be used to address the needs of our services. It is the service chiefs who are in the best position to advise Congress of their priorities. Unauthorized earmarks drain our precious resources and adversely affect our national security.

Here is a sampling of nondefense related earmarks in the conference report or the joint explanatory statement we are considering: \$12.8 million for Alaska Land Mobile Radio; \$4 million for the Northern Line Extension of the Alaska Railroad; \$1.4 million for the South Carolina Center for Excellence in Educational Technology; \$10 million for the Port of Anchorage Intermodal Marine Facility Project; and \$3.2 million for the Lewis Center for Educational Research, which houses a school and science center, but no known military application.

One of the more egregious add-ons in the legislation currently on the floor is the addition of over \$2 billion for 10 C-17 cargo planes that were not requested by the administration. The Air Force is not asking for these additional C-17s and the Quadrennial Defense Review clearly states a need for a total of only 180 aircraft. Why are 10 additional aircraft now part of a bridge fund that is designed to provide necessary resources for our conflicts in Iraq and Afghani-

stan? Another reason I find this add-on particularly objectionable is that going into conference, the House had approved only three additional C-17s and the Senate had approved only two. At a minimum, seven additional C-17 aircraft were added by the conferees, and that was outside of the matter they were tasked to resolve. I simply find this to be outrageous. The practice of adding unrequested, unauthorized, and unneeded projects onto wartime spending bills must be put to an end. Other unrequested earmarks include \$117 million for T-AGS oceanographic survey ships; \$60 million for weapons industrial facilities equipment; \$10 million for Earthmoving Scrapers; \$12.7 million for aircraft weapons range support equipment; \$10.6 million for "Other Aircraft" in the Air Force procurement category; \$22.5 million for human factors engineering technology; \$1.3 million for the RAND Arroyo Center; \$14.9 million for industrial preparedness; and \$44.5 million for the Maui Space Surveillance System.

This list goes on and on. In fact, there are hundreds of such add-ons that total over \$5 billion. I am not arguing that some of these earmarks could be used for good causes. But I do protest the process by which Congress ignores priorities of the armed services so that they can deliver Federal tax dollars for local programs, some of which have nothing to do with the defense of our Nation.

I am also concerned about our restrictive trade policies and the potentially negative impact they have on our readiness and interoperability with our allies. Every year, so-called "Buy America" restrictions cost the Department of Defense and the American taxpayers billions. I oppose these types of protectionist policies and economically they just don't make sense. Free trade improves relations between nations and promotes economic growth. "Buy America" restrictions could seriously impair our ability to compete freely in international markets and risks existing business from our longest standing trade partners and allies.

This conference report includes language to prohibit the procurement of foreign carbon or steel armor plate, ball and roller bearings, ship cranes and propellers. These "Buy America" restrictions may cost the taxpayers more than purchasing the same items on the international market, and by imposing them, we risk denying our warfighters the best available technology. Though I oppose these protectionist provisions, I appreciate that the conferees have provided for appropriate waivers based on case-by-case certifications. But these are really issues of acquisition policy, not appropriations matters, and should be addressed during the defense authorization process. Let's leave the authorizing of acquisition policy to the authorizers and debate these types of issues on authorization bills.

Mr. President, the appropriations measure before us is critical to our

fight against terror. Ideally, I would not need to criticize this legislation, but we owe it to the American taxpayers to inform them of how their money is being spent.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Alaska.

Mr. STEVENS. If my friend from Hawaii has no further comment to make, I ask for the yeas and nays.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there a sufficient second? There is a sufficient second.

The question is on agreeing to the conference report. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk called the roll.

The result was announced—yeas 100, nays 0, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 261 Leg.]

YEAS—100

Akaka	Domenici	McConnell
Alexander	Dorgan	Menendez
Allard	Durbin	Mikulski
Allen	Ensign	Murkowski
Baucus	Enzi	Murray
Bayh	Feingold	Nelson (FL)
Bennett	Feinstein	Nelson (NE)
Biden	Frist	Obama
Bingaman	Graham	Pryor
Bond	Grassley	Reed
Boxer	Gregg	Reid
Brownback	Hagel	Roberts
Bunning	Harkin	Rockefeller
Burns	Hatch	Salazar
Burr	Hutchison	Santorum
Byrd	Inhofe	Sarbanes
Cantwell	Inouye	Schumer
Carper	Isakson	Sessions
Chafee	Jeffords	Shelby
Chambliss	Johnson	Smith
Clinton	Kennedy	Snowe
Coburn	Kerry	Specter
Cochran	Kohl	Stabenow
Coleman	Kyl	Stevens
Collins	Landrieu	Sununu
Conrad	Lautenberg	Talent
Cornyn	Leahy	Thomas
Craig	Levin	Thune
Crapo	Lieberman	Vitter
Dayton	Lincoln	Voinovich
DeMint	Lott	Warner
DeWine	Lugar	Wyden
Dodd	Martinez	
Dole	McCain	

The conference report was agreed to.

Mr. STEVENS. I move to reconsider the vote, and I move to lay that motion on the table.

The motion to lay on the table was agreed to.

Mr. STEVENS. Mr. President, again, I thank the 2 people primarily responsible for the bill being so well put together, Sid Ashworth and Charlie Houy, respective assistants for Senator INOUE and me. It has been a good period dealing with this bill. This is the largest bill we have ever provided for the Department of Defense.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader.

#### Order of Business

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent there now be a period of morning business until 12 noon with the time equally divided between the two leaders or their designees, the time count under rule XXII, and the following Senators be recognized in the following order: Senator BYRD, for up

to 20 minutes; Senator SANTORUM, for up to 20 minutes; Senator FEINSTEIN, 15 minutes; Senator DEMINT, for up to 10 minutes; and 20 minutes under the control of Senator FRIST.

Ms. LANDRIEU. Reserving the right to object, could I ask the distinguished majority leader if he could add me to the list as the last person for 10 minutes?

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, I will modify the unanimous consent to Senators BYRD, 20 minutes; SANTORUM, 20 minutes; FEINSTEIN, 15 minutes; DEMINT, 10 minutes; 20 minutes, ENZI, not FRIST.

I am going back to my original unanimous consent request because I have too many Members wanting to talk. What we are doing, just for the information of our colleagues, is to lay out just morning business. We might even be able to extend morning business until the Democratic leader and I plan out the remainder of the day.

Now, as soon as I do the unanimous consent, we have a lot of Members who want to talk. We will not cut anyone off, but Members have been waiting—including Senator BYRD—since last night, and I want to be able to recognize them.

Ms. LANDRIEU. I do object, I want to be cooperative.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The objection is heard.

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

#### MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that there now be a period of morning business until 12:45, with the time equally divided between the two leaders or their designees, and further that the time count under rule XXII, and that the following Senators be recognized in the following order: BYRD, 20 minutes; SANTORUM, 20 minutes; FEINSTEIN, 15 minutes; DEMINT, 10 minutes; ENZI, 20 minutes; LANDRIEU, 10 minutes; BOXER, 10 minutes; and CRAIG, 10 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Hearing none, it is so ordered.

The Senator from West Virginia.

Mr. BYRD. Mr. President, I thank Senator FRIST and Senator REID and all other Senators.

#### APPROPRIATIONS

Mr. BYRD. Mr. President, there are only 2 days—2 days—remaining in the fiscal year, and the Senate has passed only 2—only 2—of the 12 appropriations bills. The Senate just adopted a con-

tinuing resolution to continue the operations of Government for 14 of the 15 Departments.

This dismal performance is not the result of the work of the Appropriations Committee. The Appropriations Committee did its work and, on a bipartisan basis, reported all 12—all 12—of its bills by July 26. Chairman COCHRAN did an outstanding job, a remarkable job in leading the Appropriations Committee.

Yes, the Appropriations Committee did its work, did it well. Yet, here we are, just 2 days—2 days—away from the new fiscal year, and not one—not one—appropriations bill has been signed into law. And as everyone knows, the most vital bills that have to be done before we go home are the appropriations bills or the Government will stop running. Only two are likely to be sent to the President before the majority leader recesses the Senate for the elections.

The appropriations process has once again fallen victim to politics. The majority leadership designated September national security month. As a result, conferees have completed actions on the Defense bill and on the Homeland Security conference report. These are good, bipartisan bills. But not one other appropriations bill has come before this body, the Senate of the United States.

When it comes to the funding bills for domestic agencies, with the exception of Homeland Security, the majority leadership is apparently satisfied with a mindless continuing resolution. When it comes to the education of our children, when it comes to the health of the elderly, when it comes to the ability of our deteriorating infrastructure to sustain a growing economy, and the fiscal health of our farms, the majority leadership wants no debate—no debate—no debate—just a rubberstamp of a formula-based continuing resolution for 13 of the 15 Departments.

The majority leadership made a specific choice to delay bringing the domestic appropriations bills to the floor because it wished to avoid an open debate in the Senate—in this forum, where debate is free and open and one may speak as long as his or her feet will sustain him or her—it wished to avoid an open debate in the Senate about the many issues confronting Americans in their daily lives. That is what we are talking about.

The President submitted a budget for domestic programs that cut funding by \$14 billion below the level necessary to keep pace with inflation. The President's proposal to increase fees on our veterans for their health care is indefensible. The White House proposed cuts in education, cuts in programs to fight crime. The President's budget is not sustainable. Yet, once more behind closed doors, the majority leadership inserted a cap on spending at the level proposed by the President's budget. This was done by jamming a cap on spending in an unamendable conference